



Tips for Coalition Building

What is a Coalition?

Meaning “to grow together,” a coalition is an alliance of individuals or groups working together to influence outcomes of a specific problem. Coalitions are formed to meet challenges, such as those in injury prevention, by capitalizing on the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Coalitions can be an effective means to achieve a collaborative and coordinated approach. For example, a Safe Communities Coalition may organize to foster community ownership of both the problem of motor vehicle injuries and the resources available to help solve the problem. Members may include teachers, Emergency Medical Service (EMS) providers, local officials, and state and local government agencies, law enforcement, and citizens.

Coalition Building

Defining Goals and Objectives

Gather and analyze available data to define the problem

Defining the problem or area that the coalition is going to address should begin before the coalition is formed. When a coalition forms, such as a Safe Communities Coalition, there may be a difference between perceived needs and data-driven needs. If coalition members don't buy-in to the data-identified problems and recognize them as valid, the coalition may not be able to work toward reducing some of the perceived needs in the community. A Safe Communities Coalition, however, should always look at injury data to define the problems and look for solutions. Adequate problem identification may suggest that a coalition may not be the best way to address the concerns. For example, a group of parents wants to organize a coalition to increase the number of teachers trained in pedestrian safety. However, assessment reveals that all public school teachers attend an inservice in the beginning of each school year. Is there a real and identified problem? Would a coalition be an effective tool?

What is the overall goal of your coalition?

The goal may be broad, such as to reduce motor vehicle deaths and injuries, or limited in scope, such as to increase the number of local businesses giving seat belt use information to their employees. Goals often include time lines, such as “By December of this year, our coalition will ...”

What is the purpose of the coalition?

What do you want to accomplish? This may be developed as a mission statement. For example, “The Louisiana Safe Communities Coalition of public, private, and voluntary organizations works to prevent unintentional injuries,

especially motor vehicle injuries, to all residents and visitors through a multi-faceted approach of increasing public awareness, providing education, and advocating for environmental and public policy changes.”

Example

A community is interested in preventing motor vehicle injuries. Assessment reveals a high incidence of injury to adolescents with alcohol as a factor. The local media and police are already interested in the problem. Local police, alcohol store owners, area parents, and high school Students Against Driving Drunk (SADD) members are all interested in educating teens about alcohol and motor vehicles. In this case, there is a need and an interest. A coalition might be an effective tool to help reduce the amount of adolescent drinking and motor vehicle use.

What are the main objectives of your coalition?

Objectives include what your coalition will and will not do. Be specific to help reduce confusion and focus efforts. For example, your Safe Communities Coalition may include community education about seat belt use, but not a legislative agenda. More exact than the coalition's goals, objectives are specific and concrete. One example is “The Seat Belt Use Coalition of Boise will increase child safety seat use from 35 percent to 50 percent in the next three years.”

Community Assessment

Assess what is already being done in the community to organize or impact your health objectives or goals. Ask questions. Which people or organizations are already involved in similar activities? What are their successes? What resources have they used and what is available? Who are their partners? Have they identified others to involve? Coalitions build on the success of others to have the most impact on the community. This step may also help you identify key players, agencies, or group members.

Identifying Key Players or Leaders

Who is leading the safe community effort and why?

Like groups, coalitions need leadership. Leadership may vary depending on the goals and objectives, as well as the membership. In some cases leadership may be suggested by a national objective or format, such as the Safe Communities plan. Often, the success of a campaign results from the course of action chosen at the grassroots level by local decision-makers. No one likes to be told exactly how and when to do something. People take pride in their own work and are willing to work if they take part in the planning. Safe Communities recognizes this and encourages local coalitions to be leaders.

Ask questions similar to those above. An assessment of resources may indicate that an agency or group has the expertise, skills, knowledge, and interest in being the lead agency. Interest is a key component. If someone is interested in the issues and/or the coalition, he/she will be more likely to participate and follow through on activities.

Where will it be housed?

This may depend on the lead agency or chairperson. Coalitions, like committee meetings, should have a chairperson who reserves rooms; provides agendas, updates, meeting reminders, and minutes; and acts as a facilitator during discussions. Ideally, the chairperson will have the backing of an agency which has both credibility and capacity for providing neutral facilitation. Resources should also be considered. Does the chairperson have access to a copier, computer, or postage? Coalitions need a “home base” which can be used for correspondence and as a way to keep members informed. Please keep in mind that this does not have to be an agency; it could be a person. Each community is different and has different resources. Not all Safe Communities Coalitions will have someone from a government agency as the chairperson; he/she may be an emergency department nurse who has seen the effects of car crashes. It could well be that the home base is the chairperson’s or a volunteer’s home. Selection of leader, individual or agency, should be based on an assessment of the most appropriate use of resources. The chairperson, membership, and levels of participation should depend on the goals and problems as identified by the coalition.

Identifying Coalition Members**How do you identify members?**

Look at the skills of various individuals and agencies. Ask an agency to designate an appropriate representative. Be sure to keep a multi-disciplinary focus, including educators, law enforcement, health and safety professionals, traffic engineers, local businesses, citizens, and policy makers. Keep in mind that some players need to be invited to the table for political reasons. If group A is invited, then group B should also be invited. This is not a bad thing. Establishing group cohesion is an important step — no one wants to be left out.

How do you achieve buy in?

What’s in it for me? Why should a member join the Coalition? Help identify possible benefits for the individual or agency while promoting the purpose and work of the group. It could be community outreach and involvement by a local business or the idea that you are helping prevent injuries. Examine what contributions various members can make as well as what they can get from the Coalition. Members need to understand the role of the coalition and the way coalitions work; primarily the emphasis on teamwork and cooperation. One can meet his or her individual needs through the work of the Coalition. Results, successes, and set backs are shared by all Coalition members. Remember, coalitions are formed to meet challenges by capitalizing on the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Do the members agree on the coalition’s purpose?

Although coalition members may have different motivations, they should agree on the purpose of the coalition. These agendas may serve the coalition by providing expertise and guidance. For example, the coalition members involved in law enforcement may want some good public relations for the police department and see the coalition as a way to save lives and help them get more involved with the community.

Examples of State and Local Partners.

Businesses

Child care providers

Citizens

Community/religious/civic groups

EMS providers

Health professionals

Insurance groups

Judges and prosecutors

Local/state elected officials

Medical professionals

Safety groups such as AAA or safety councils

Schools

Seat belt use survivors

State and local advocacy groups such as SAFE KIDS coalitions or Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)

State and local government

State and local government agencies such as the health department and disability prevention programs

State and local law enforcement

State highway safety offices

Student organizations

Traffic engineers

Keeping Your Coalition Active

Know your members.

Do members prefer morning or afternoon meetings? Do they prefer to spend the first few minutes of a meeting socializing and catching up with each other? Do they tend to get off track and need an active facilitator to keep them progressing? What are the expectations of the members and are they being met?

Run an effective meeting.

Be sure to be prepared by knowing when and how to conduct an appropriate

meeting, establishing meeting structure, avoiding unnecessary interruptions, arriving on time, observing time limits, and encouraging participation. Provide a written agenda and stick to it.

Stay in touch with members.

Do they prefer faxed messages or mailings? Provide regular updates of coalition activities and progress.

Keep it simple.

People tend to prefer the basics, especially when it comes to various responsibility and task assignments.

Keep members involved.

Maintain enthusiasm with awards and by recognizing the efforts of coalition members. Be sure to give credit where credit is due. Avoid burnout by recognizing workload and distributing it as evenly as possible. Look for signs of burnout such as members not completing responsibilities, tardiness, or lower attendance at meetings. Actively work to reduce burnout by keeping in mind why people got involved in the coalition in the first place.

Losing sight of individual member needs will decrease enthusiasm and greatly affect the coalition as a whole. Routinely discuss progress and success. Brainstorm and involve members. If members feel uninvolved or not necessary, they will drop out. Remember, everyone has a unique perspective to add to the discussion. Actively recruit new members. Fresh ideas and energy keep the team excited.

Funding.

Last but certainly not least, keep fiscal resources in mind. Often coalitions have initial funding, or seed money, that is for a limited amount of time. Coalitions should work toward being self-sufficient. With all the enthusiasm of members, if there is no stable source of funding, the coalition may well go out of existence. Your coalition may have a fundraising committee, benevolent corporate sponsor, or have one participating agency work on continuing funding. Securing funding will help the coalition keep moving. After all, worrying about how to cover postage and phone calls is labor intensive and not fun. Don't be fooled — fundraising is hard work, but a necessity.

About the Author

Kerry Chausmer, MSW, MPH, has worked for the Louisiana Office of Public Health as the state coordinator of the Louisiana SAFE KIDS Coalition since its inception in 1994. The Louisiana SAFE KIDS Coalition is a joint venture by the Office of Public Health and Children's Hospital. The Louisiana SAFE KIDS Coalition has over 40 organizations actively involved on the advisory board with 11 local chapters.

